

Mind Games

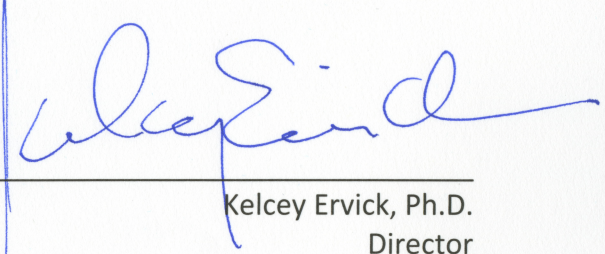
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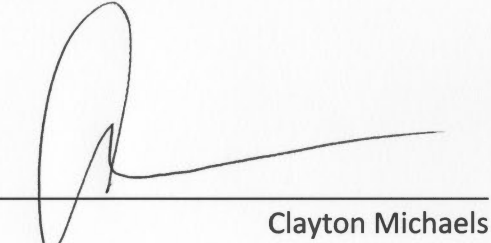
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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my children, Matthew Alexander and Jarod Parker.

Their unwavering belief in me has gotten me to this point.

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Mind Games

Sawyer was thinking about a girl as he walked through his front door after school. Casey Jenkins. Senior prom was in two months and he was trying to find the courage to ask her to go with him. His "promposal" would have to be really special if he was going to have a chance with her. He stepped over the mail scattered over the entryway floor and dropped his bag down next to the wall. He grumbled to himself, "We can't get a mailbox like everyone else. No, we get a mail slot in the door." As he picked up the mail, he looked through it to see if anything was important.

"This is such a waste of paper," he muttered, wadding up the pages of grocery store advertisements and fast food coupons. His mother never looked at them, so it was just one more thing he had to take care of when he got home from school. He was surprised to see his name on one of the envelopes. The handwritten scrawl was barely legible, and it wasn't handwriting that Sawyer recognized. He sat the letter on the dining room table, along with the rest of the mail, on his way to the kitchen trash can. He disposed of the flyers, coupons, and "pre-approved" credit card applications, and went back to the dining room. The envelope was plain white, and there was no return address listed. There was no stamp or postmark, either. Someone had come out to the house and slid the letter through the mail slot.

He could feel something hard in the bottom of the envelope. He tore it open. Inside was a folded sheet of lined paper and a small key. He placed the key on the table and unfolded the letter. It was written in the same scrawl as the envelope, and Sawyer struggled to decipher the words.

"Sawyer,

If you're reading this, it means I'm dead. My name's Clyde, by the way, and I'm your grandpa. Your mama is my daughter. I doubt she ever told you 'bout me. I tried to see you a few times, but she wouldn't let me. And every time I tried to see you, she'd pack you up and move someplace else! Every single time! Well, I'm dead now, so she can't keep you away from me, now can she? I might not been able to see you when I was alive, but I got some things I want you to have. Don't tell your mama or she won't let you have them. The key is for the padlock on storage unit 230 at the self-serve storage place on Grandview. You know where that is, right? There's a code to get through the gate. 0412. Everything in there is yours. Don't let your mama take it from you. I hope you enjoy having it as much as I've enjoyed collecting it.

Grandpa Clyde

Sawyer had always been told that his grandfather was dead. On Grandparent's Day, his kindergarten class had spent the day making cards for all of the class's grandparents. Sawyer had no one to make a card for, so he colored alone. When he got home, he asked his mother if he had any grandparents. She got a strange look on her face, but then told him no. All of his grandparents had died before he was born. He was sad for a few days that he didn't know what it was like to have grandparents, but he'd never known anything else and as he got older, he felt the absence less and less. Now it turns out he had a grandparent all along and his mother lied to him about it. Sawyer's vision narrowed until he felt like darkness engulfed him. There was one rule that neither Sawyer nor his mother was allowed to break: no lying. He had lied once, when he was

eight, because he broke a window with a baseball and he was afraid of getting in trouble. The trouble Sawyer got into for lying was worse than anything he would have gotten for breaking the window. His mother made it clear that there were no exceptions and no extenuating circumstances to this rule. For either of them. This rule was so sacred that Sawyer never even believed in Santa Claus because Santa wasn't real, so believing in him was a lie. His mother wouldn't lie to him about things that don't matter, but she lied to him about his own family. There were so many emotions fighting to get expressed that Sawyer felt numb. He just stood there, letter crumpled in his hand, and concentrated on breathing.

Don't tell your mama or she won't let you have them.

Don't tell your mama.

Don't tell.

Sawyer stood there until he heard a car door slam in the driveway. He snatched the key up from the table and shoved it and the letter in his back jeans pocket. He walked back to the entryway just as his mother walked through the door.

"Hey, Sawyer. How was school today?" she asked as she walked past him to hang up her purse.

"It was fine. Listen, I told Scott I would come over and help him with Biology today. We have a big test tomorrow and he's freaking out."

"Ok, honey, but don't take all night. Are you eating dinner over there?"

"Uh, no. No, I'll eat here. I can reheat something when I get home."

His mother offered her cheek to Sawyer for a kiss, but he walked past her and out the door without saying a word. For only the second time in his life, he had lied to his mother's face. He couldn't bring himself to kiss her goodbye. Besides, her lying was so much worse than his. She didn't deserve affection right now.

It wasn't a long drive to the storage lot, but Sawyer hit every red light there. As he waited for each signal to change, he thought over his grandfather's note. He didn't like keeping stuff from his mom, but she hadn't had a problem keeping things from him. Still, he kept tripping over being told not to tell. His mom had always told him that if someone ever said, "Don't tell your mom," that he should immediately tell her. He would be eighteen in 6 weeks, though, so he was practically an adult. At any rate, he was way too old to be running to his mommy over some dead guy claiming to be his grandfather and telling him to keep stuff from her. Besides, keeping something from her wasn't the same thing as lying to her, so it wasn't like he lied to her twice in one day or anything. He pulled in to the storage lot, convinced that his mother's rules no longer applied.

Sawyer drove up to the keypad that operated the gate. He rolled down his window, then pressed 0412 on the keypad. There was a clicking sound, and then the gate rolled open. He rolled up his window and drove through the opening. The gate rolled closed behind him and he read the numbers at the end of each row. The units were lined up much like library shelves, and he thought briefly about how much his mother loved the library. She used to take him there when he was younger, and they would spend hours reading picture books and making crafts. Sawyer shook his head in

annoyance. This wasn't about his mother. It was about him. The row he faced was listed as units 150-159. The row to his left was listed as 140-149. He turned right and drove until he reached the row listed as 230-239, parking the car in front of the first unit. He sat there, the engine idling softly.

Telling himself there was nothing to be afraid of, he turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car. He wasn't afraid, exactly. Apprehensive might be closer to it, but of what he couldn't say. Reaching back into his right pocket, he pulled out the crumpled note and the small silver key. The padlock was threaded through a small metal loop covered by a hasp on the side of the door. Sawyer tilted the lock upward, then slid his key into the small keyhole in the bottom of the lock. His key turn was rewarded with a crisp click as the lock sprang open. He swiveled the heavy base, then removed the lock from the metal loop and opened the hasp. The storage door worked like a small garage door. He grabbed the small metal handle at the bottom and smoothly rolled the door up into the unit until he could walk inside without ducking.

The storage area was dark and had a faint musty smell, as though the door didn't keep the rain out as well as it could have. It was pitch black inside the unit, and he hadn't thought to bring a flashlight, so he got back in the car and re-parked so he could use the headlights to see. It wasn't a large unit, but it was way too big for the one medium sized Rubbermaid tote stored inside. Sawyer walked the perimeter of the unit just to make sure he had missed nothing, but the tote was the only thing waiting for him. "Everything inside is yours. Gee, thanks Grandpa. Your generosity is overwhelming," he muttered.

The lid was covered in a thick layer of dust, like no one had gotten into the tote for a while. He wondered what could be so important that someone would not only keep it and pass it along once they've died, but not so important that they would want to keep it locked away. Sawyer pried open one end of the container. The dust leaped up from the lid, choking him in a cloud of grey and stinging his eyes. Coughing, he backed out of the unit and blinked his tearing eyes. When his eyes stopped watering enough for him to see clearly, he popped the trunk and loaded the tote inside. As curious as he was about the contents, he wasn't willing to risk blinding himself again. Besides, he had no idea how long it would take him to go through the contents. He'd take it home where he could clean it off and go through it in privacy. He popped the trunk and bent to lift the tote. It was a lot heavier than its size implied, but he lifted it without help. Sawyer sat it in the trunk and closed the lid, imagining valuable jewelry or collectibles that he could sell off. That's the kind of stuff he would keep locked away for safety. He didn't even know the guy, so he wasn't emotionally attached to anything that could be inside.

The drive home took less time than the drive to the storage unit, thanks to several green lights. He had just pulled in front of his house and killed the engine when his mother came storming outside.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Mom—"

"Don't you dare 'Mom' me, mister. I called over to Scott's house because you left your backpack. Scott's mom had no idea you were coming over. So where did you go?"

She punctuated every word as though they were individual sentences, one of the signs his mother was not going to let this go until she had the answers she wanted. At least before, when she did that, it was because Sawyer didn't have the answers she wanted. He couldn't tell her what he didn't know. This time he could answer her, but her anger reignited his own. Of the two of them, Sawyer felt he was the only one who had a right to be angry.

"So I didn't go over to Scott's house. So what? I'm almost eighteen. I can go out for an hour if I want to."

"Oh, you think so?" Andrea asked. "The last time I checked, I paid for that car and I pay for the insurance. The next time you wanna act like you're grown, maybe you oughtta walk where you're goin'."

When the redneck came out in his mother's speech, she was beyond mad. Instead of backing down and apologizing, though, it only made Sawyer just as mad.

"You want to know where I went? You really want to know? Fine. I went to a storage unit. Seems like someone slipped me a note and key through the mail slot today. I have no idea who, but imagine my surprise when I opened the envelope and there was a note from my dead grandfather. Only he was really dead this time."

He watched his mother's complexion go from nearly purple to chalk white. Her eyes were wide and her hands shook. If Sawyer hadn't been so angry, he would have sworn she was terrified of something, but right now he didn't care what she felt. He was the one who had been lied to for all of these years.

"What was in the storage unit?" she asked in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

"Why do you care? It's not for you, it's for me."

The rebellion that Sawyer felt faded as his mother's face regained color and her hands steadied. He had pushed her too far, but he couldn't bring himself to back down, either. They stood there, their anger throbbing like veins in their foreheads, until his mother's voice sliced through the tension.

"You will tell me what was in that storage unit and you will hand it over. There is nothing that man could have left you that's good and I will not have one single shred of it under my roof. Is that clear?"

Sawyer wanted to stand his ground. He was almost eighteen, and it was about time his mother started treating him like an adult. He wasn't about to sacrifice her help with prom expenses, though.

"There was a Rubbermaid tote in the storage unit. I have no idea what was in it. It was all dirty and dark in there, so I couldn't see anything."

If he stuck as close to the truth as possible, his mother wouldn't question him too closely. And so far, he hadn't needed to lie. He had a sinking feeling that wouldn't last for long, and his mother's next question confirmed that feeling.

"Where's the tote now?"

If he told her he had it in his trunk, she'd never let him have it. Grandpa Clyde was right about that. He kicked himself for not using a better excuse than helping Scott

study for a test. If he had, he could have avoided all of this. She didn't have the right to keep him from his inheritance, though. It was left to him and he was going to keep it.

"I left it in the storage container. It was really heavy, so I figured I'd come back later for it. When I had a flashlight or something with me."

His mother's face sagged as though remaining angry was more effort than she could exert. Sawyer had never seen her look so tired. No, tired wasn't the right word for it. Defeated, maybe. He'd seen her angry before. He'd even seen her scared before, though it had been a long time. Sawyer had been ten the last time he could remember her being really scared. When he told his mother that he didn't want to move again because he was sick of moving and he finally had some friends, she managed to look scared and angry at the same time. He'd never seen her look like this before. Something his grandfather had written tugged at his memory. He couldn't reread the note with his mother standing right in front of him, but he thought it said something about always moving away whenever he tried to see them. Why would she do that?

Her expression did what her anger, fear, and yelling couldn't. Sawyer felt guilty again for lying to her, and he was tempted to tell her the truth. It was too late to come clean, though, if he wanted any chance of not being grounded until graduation. He just had to be careful that she didn't find out he had the tote with him.

"I want the key to the unit. And don't those places usually have some sort of code to get in? I want that, too."

Sawyer's stomach sank. The code for the gate was easy enough to memorize. It was his birthday, though he wasn't sure how his grandfather would have known that.

The key, though. That would be a problem. He'd never be able to sneak the tote back into the storage unit without it. If he had a copy of the key, he wouldn't have to worry about it. He didn't have a copy for the same reason he didn't have a great excuse to go to the storage unit. Still, if he could slip the key out when his mother was busy doing other things, he could sneak back to the storage unit, put the tote back, and have the key back to his mom before she knew it was missing. It wasn't the best plan, but it was the one he had, so he was going with it. With a sigh, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the now-crumpled note and the padlock key. He handed them over to her without lifting his eyes to her face. He heard the paper rustle, and after a few seconds he heard it being wadded up into a ball. Sawyer only lifted his head when his mother's shoes disappeared from his sight.

Dinner that night was silent. The sounds of his mother's fork scraping her plate as she moved her food from one side to the other occupied the space that conversation usually did. Sawyer didn't let the awkwardness interfere with his appetite, though, and he cleaned his plate. His mother nodded when he asked, "Can I be excused?" She said nothing as his chair legs groaned against the hard floor. When he came back from rinsing his dishes and loading them into the dishwasher, she was still sitting there. She was moving her peas one at a time and positioning them into a design that only she understood. He thought about asking her why they moved so much and why she didn't want his grandfather to see them. He thought about asking her why she had looked so scared before and why she looked so broken now. Then he realized how many other times his mother had lied to him. Every time they had to move, she made up a different

reason. He had to change schools every time they moved, and he hated always being the new kid. He had to make new friends only to leave them behind when they moved again. His mother forbade him to have any contact with them. Sawyer added up all the lies, all of the cost to him, and then continued through the dining room and into his room. He could ask her those things, but he had no guarantee she would tell him the truth. He wasn't going to waste his time. It would be a few hours yet until his mother would go to bed, and he didn't dare try to get the tote from his car until then.

An hour later he heard the door to his mother's room close. Sawyer poked his head out of his room and scanned the hallway, listening for any sounds that his mother would be coming back out. He stood there straining for the slightest sound, but the house was silent. He left his door open as he walked to the front door, unlocked it, and walked straight to his car. Now that the time was here, he felt apprehensive about doing this. As long as he didn't look inside the tote, he could come clean about having it. He'd still get in trouble, and he could kiss prom goodbye. It was his senior year and he'd never get another prom. He couldn't shake the image of his mother pushing her peas around her plate, though. Was a tote full of who-knows-what from a dead guy he'd never met worth all of the things his mother was going through?

Maybe not, he reasoned, but he deserved to know that he had a grandfather and he deserved to not be lied to his whole life. The tote was probably full of old junk that he'd just pitch anyway, but it was his old junk and he had the right to at least see it before deciding to forfeit it. He popped his trunk open and removed the tote, closing the trunk as gently as he could and still getting it to latch. The plastic tub was heavier

than he remembered, and he struggled to get it inside without making enough noise to rouse his mother. He walked through the open front door and left it open as he walked through the house to his bedroom. He hid the tote on the other side of his bed before going back and close the front door, relocking it and giving the door a pull just to make sure.

Back in the safety of his room, Sawyer pulled off the tote's lid. The lid was even filthier in full light than it was in his car's headlights, so he placed it on the floor, nudging it under his bed and out of the way. He looked inside and saw the tote was filled with photo albums, loose photos, and a few DVDs that were marked "Andrea Age 13," "Andrea Age 12," and so on. He started going through the loose photos first, looking at each one for a long time before setting them off to the side and grabbing more. Most of these were of him. Many of them were candid shots taken at the park near his house. He played there all the time when he was younger, and he tried to recall if he'd seen a strange man taking pictures, but all he remembered was playing on the swings with the other kids. The pictures ranged from him being a toddler to a few that he recognized as being only a few months old, all taken at a distance. He chilled at the thought that he was being photographed without his knowledge. He'd ask his friends tomorrow if they remembered anyone taking pictures around the school. Those snapshots bothered him far less than the recent one that was taken outside his house. It was evening in the photo, and Sawyer was clearly visible through his bedroom window. His bedroom lights illuminated far more than he realized, and with a tinge of paranoia, he got up and closed his curtains. He would never be so careless about leaving them open again.

Sawyer almost ignored the rest of the contents. He could very nearly feel the dead man's eyes watching him even though he knew that was impossible. He grabbed the first of the three large photo albums more from wanting to be done with it all than out of curiosity. The album was of his mother from infancy to toddlerhood. The Polaroids were hand dated with his mother's name and age and arranged in chronological order. A woman appeared in many of the pictures, and Sawyer assumed that this was likely his grandmother. She looked very much like his mother looked now, and there was a kindness in her eyes. Sawyer wished he had had the chance to know her. The next two albums were the same, each picking up where the one before it left off. Sad toddler pictures replaced the smiling baby ones. When Sawyer got to the final album, his mother had hidden her face in nearly all of the photos. When she had nothing to hold in front of her face, she turned so that only the side or the back of her head was visible. His grandmother no longer showed up in the photos. The oldest age written down was ten.

Glad to be almost through the contents, Sawyer grabbed up one of the DVDs and took it over to his computer. Like the Polaroids, the disks were labeled with his mother's name and her age. The one Sawyer grabbed was labeled, "Andrea, Age11." He popped it in his DVD player and used his media player to locate the files on the disk. There was only one large file, so he clicked on it and waited for it to execute. The DVD file started with what Sawyer assumed was a camcorder on a tripod pointed at an old style box TV. The picture was too steady for anyone to be holding the camera. A man filled the frame as he walked to the TV and put a tape into the VCR. The man backed away towards the

camera, his face never visible to the lens, until he left the frame and the TV became the main focus.

The VCR began to play, and Sawyer saw a room that was empty except for the little girl in front of the camera. Sawyer recognized her from the photos he'd just gone through. It must have been summertime because she was wearing a tank top and shorts, her long hair pulled back into pigtails. Like the photos, she was trying to hide her face from the camera. The picture was fuzzy and there were specks like lint that popped and cracked over the images, as though the tape had been watched and re-watched to the point of disintegration. A large figure joined the little girl. Sawyer could feel the man crowding him, even though he was twice removed from the room that the man and the girl occupied, separated by more than a lifetime. Sawyer watched as the girl curled in on herself, reminding him of the roly poly bugs he found outside in the summertime, rolling into an impenetrable ball. The man knelt down, his face recognizable as the one the little girl wore, and brought his hand down to her head. He smoothed her bangs away from her forehead and wound a pigtail through his fingers. The girl's eyes looked glassy, and Sawyer felt his face turning green.

He thought he heard his grandfather say, "Stand up," but the volume was soft and he couldn't be sure. He knew the volume on his computer was up, so the TV volume must have been turned low. When his mother wouldn't stand, his grandfather wrapped his meaty hand around her upper arm and hauled her to her knees, her body in profile to the camera. If his mother made a sound, Sawyer couldn't hear it, but he watched as fat tears spilled over her lower lids and down her cheeks. She lifted her hand to wipe

them away, but his grandfather stopped her, his hushed voice saying, "Leave them. I like it better when you cry."

"Oh, yeah," his much louder, breathless voice said as he watched the TV screen, "I love it when you cry."

Sawyer's stomach roiled as he could hear the man's labored breathing, and when the film version of himself reached for his zipper, Sawyer only had time to hit the space bar on his keyboard, pausing the playback and freezing his mother's profile on the screen, and run to the bathroom before he vomited. His stomach spasmed long after he had voided its contents, and when he could stand, his nose punctuated his vomit with blood. He held a wad of toilet paper to his nose with one shaking hand and filled a cup of water from the bathroom sink with the other. He rinsed, but no matter how many times he swished and spat, the phantom taste of bile haunted his mouth.

He stood at the sink even after his hands steadied. More than once he tried to look at his reflection, but he couldn't. The ashen face staring back at him was his mother's. His grandfather's. With that thought, Sawyer hit his knees in front of the toilet bowl once more, throwing up nothing more than traces of stomach acid and dribbling blood like drops of red food coloring into the water.

When Sawyer made it back to his room, he closed his media player without looking at the frozen frame. He didn't need to ever see it again to be able recall every last detail. He feared the video would be burned onto his retinas like a ghost image on a computer screen, replaying itself over and over again every time he closed his eyes. He ejected the DVD from the drive, and then snapped it in two. He snapped the halves into

quarters, and he kept snapping until he couldn't snap anymore pieces. He pulled out the rest of the DVDs and did the same to them, cutting his hand on the sharp edges. He noticed, but he didn't care. He threw the disk fragments into his trash can before heading back to the bathroom to take care of his hand.

He had to tell his mother. There was no way he could look at her day after day and be able to pretend that he hadn't seen what he'd seen. He didn't need to see the other disks to know what was on them. He felt like his mother had been abused all over again, only this time it was his fault. He knew now why she had never mentioned his grandfather, why the note said she had packed them both up and moved away whenever he found them. His eyes blurred with dizziness as he recalled all of the pictures of him growing up, the storage security code that was his birthday. Had his mother recognized it when she read the letter, or had the shock dulled her perception? Sawyer suspected the latter. If she realized the significance, she would have driven him to the storage unit herself so they could destroy the tote. He wasn't sure if she would have looked inside beforehand; he wasn't sure it would have mattered what was inside. He wished she would have recognized the code.

The alcohol should have burned. He had meant to grab the hydrogen peroxide, but grabbed the alcohol by mistake and was already pouring before he realized it. He didn't blow on his cuts; his eyes didn't tear. He uttered not one profanity. He applied antibiotic ointment, but he didn't feel like it was really him applying it. Sawyer wondered if this is what shock felt like. He had seen people on TV shows that were in plane crashes or explosions, and they kept checking their watches or asking if anyone

had fed the cat. He didn't wear a watch, and he didn't have a cat, but he felt as though part of him had been removed from his body and wrapped in wool. He wanted it to hurt, not because he enjoyed pain but because it would take up time. He wanted to waste a few minutes comforting himself or cursing his carelessness. Since he could do neither, he made his way slowly to his mother's bedroom.

He knocked lightly on her door. He was afraid he would wake her even though that was exactly what he meant to do. If she didn't come to the door, maybe he could pretend he had done his part, and then he wouldn't have to see this through. If she didn't come to the door, maybe he could destroy the rest of his inheritance and pretend that he had made everything okay. His knock was enough to wake her, or maybe she had never been asleep, and she came to the door wearing bruise-colored smudges under her eyes.

"It's getting late. You should be in bed already."

"I know. Mom, I need to talk to you. I did something and I don't know how to fix it or if it can even be fixed and I really screwed up and I don't know what to do and I—."

Sawyer's voice cracked, and his attempt at confession brought the tears that the alcohol could not. His shoulders shook as he buried his face in his hands, unable to do more than breathe and sob.

"Sawyer, what's wrong? You're scaring me."

"Mama, I'm so sorry. You're not gonna love me anymore. I don't deserve to be loved. You're never gonna forgive me."

It had been years since he had called her Mama. He didn't expect her arms to close around him, pushing his hand-buried face into her chest as she squeezed him.

"You listen to me, baby. I will always love you, no matter what."

"You can't say that, Mama. You can't. You don't know what I did and when you do know, you'll take it all back."

"I think I might have an idea. You looked inside that tote, didn't you? After saying it was too dark. I already figured you had. I've been your mother long enough to know how you are."

Sawyer lifted his head until he could look into her face, his hands still trapped between them. That she had guessed part of it was enough for him to control his crying, though straggling tears slipped out.

"Sorta. I mean, I did look inside, but I didn't do it at the storage unit. I did it here. In my bedroom. I brought it back here with me."

Whatever his mother had expected, he could see from her expression that she hadn't quite expected that. Her lips pursed and her eyes narrowed, but she reached up to dry his cheeks and smooth back his hair from his eyes.

"Well, whether you looked at it here or at the storage unit, it doesn't really make a difference, does it?"

"Yeah, it kinda does. There were a bunch of pictures. Pictures of you, of me playing in the playground and graduating elementary school. But that wasn't all. That wasn't the worst of it."

"What do you mean, 'the worst of it'?"

"There were DVDs in with the pictures. I didn't know what was on them, so I grabbed one and started to play it. I only put in the one, I swear, Mom. I broke it, and I broke all the other ones in there. If I had known what was on them, I would have never played it."

At the mention of the videos, his mother dropped her hands and took a step back. Her face was bloodless, and Sawyer could see her veins slithering through her cheeks like bluish snakes.

"As soon as I figured out what was on it, I stopped it. I promise, Mom. I didn't actually see him do anything. I didn't watch it that far. I wouldn't. I'm so, so sorry."

She didn't speak, and Sawyer didn't know if it was because she couldn't or because she didn't trust herself to. She simply nodded her head in what he thought was acceptance. She turned and walked down the hall and into the living room, sitting on the couch and tucking her feet up under her. Sawyer followed and sat next to her. Neither of them spoke. The silence filled the room; it felt like decades. He didn't know if his mother had the strength to break it. He had never seen her look fragile. He couldn't remember her ever looking weak or helpless, but he saw her strength lying in pieces in her eyes.

"I know this doesn't fix anything, but I'm sorry, Mom. I shouldn't have lied to you, and I shouldn't have gone behind your back. We had our rule about not lying, not ever, and I was so mad at you for lying to me. I should have trusted that you had your reasons for telling me my grandfather was dead. This wasn't any of my business."

"No, it wasn't."

Her tone slapped, wounding him more than the cuts on his hand. He hated crying, hated feeling like a baby, but he couldn't keep his eyes from refilling even as he gouged his fingernails into his palms and bit the edge of his tongue. He only hoped to keep them from falling.

"You're right. We had a rule, and I probably should have told you...something. I should have known that man would never let me be, even in death. I guess that when I hadn't heard from him for so long, I thought I had finally gotten us far enough away from him. Clearly, I was wrong."

"I understand now why you didn't. I wish I could go back to not knowing."

"Yeah, I wish you could, too."

The return of his mother's sarcastic tone eased the tightness in Sawyer's chest, and he was able to breathe just a little easier. Things were far from ok with them, but for the first time since he opened that tote, he felt like everything would work out.

"I don't want to not know for me, Mom. I want to take it back for you. I don't want you to have to know that I know. Ya know?"

Her laugh startled him, even though that was his intention. The silent tension eased its stranglehold; it was still palpable, but it wasn't suffocating anymore.

"I wish he wasn't dead."

His mother's head snapped back to look at him, her lips parted in a silent question.

"It's not fair," Sawyer continued. "It isn't fair that he could literally drop this on me, on us, and he's dead. We can't tell him how fucked up this is."

"Language."

"We can't take this stuff to the cops. I mean, it's illegal, Mom. What he did to you was a fucking crime."

"Language."

Her tone was stronger this time, but Sawyer continued as though he didn't hear her. Now that he was moving past his disgust and his guilt, he was getting angry.

"I could hear him. In the video. He was taping himself watching a VCR tape, adding his disgusting comments. He was getting off to it. That sick bastard!"

"Sawyer, language!"

"Fuck the language, Mom. Pretty sure that me saying a few bad words isn't the worst thing that's happened tonight. Let's try to have a bit of perspective, ok?"

He didn't know if it was because he was right or not, but she said, "Ok," and he went with it.

"I have so many questions, but I don't know if I should ask them and I don't know if you'll tell me the truth even if I do."

Sawyer could see his mother wanted to be anywhere but here in the living room having this conversation with him. He sat quietly, giving her the time she needed to work through whatever was going through her head. When she looked like she had made some sort of decision, she nodded her head and waited for his first question.

"Where was your mom through all of this? Where was Grandma? I saw her in some of your baby pictures, but by the time you looked like you were in school, she wasn't in any of them."

"My mother wasn't there. I tried to tell her once, but she didn't believe me. She said I was lying and that she didn't want to hear another word about it."

"Jesus."

"I'm pretty sure he had nothing to do with it."

"So what happened after that?"

"One night, after he had...." Her voice faltered, and she took a deep breathe before she continued. "After he had raped me, it was pretty bad. I was bleeding some and I was terrified I was going to die. I tried to show my mom, but she said the blood was from starting my period and she handed me a box of pads. I threw the box down and told her what he'd done, and I'll never forget what she said. She said, 'I thought I told you I didn't want to hear any more of your lies. Now go clean yourself up and put one of those pads in your underwear so you don't bleed all over the place.'"

Sawyer didn't know what to say, so he said nothing. He couldn't imagine ever coming to his mother with something like that and hearing her tell him he was lying. Nothing like that had ever happened to him. He looked back at all the times he thought his mother was being overprotective and, for the first time, he was grateful. How many potential situations had he avoided because his mother was hypervigilant about who was around him? How many people had they avoided because she hadn't liked the "vibe" they put out? He couldn't say.

"So then what happened?" he finally asked.

"I tried to tell her one too many times. She said I was trying to hurt her and that's why I kept lying about my dad. She said she wasn't going to take it anymore, so

she packed her bags and she left me with him. I don't think they ever got divorced. She just wasn't there anymore."

"That's messed up."

"Yeah, yeah it is, but there was nothing I could do about it. When I was sixteen, I found out I was pregnant. I knew there was no way I could bring a child into that house, so I quit school and I ran away before he figured it out. He found me a few weeks later. I wasn't very good at running then. He tried to make me go home with him, but I'd just pack up and run away again. Once he realized that I was pregnant, he threatened to bring the police to force me back home. I knew he'd never risk that, though, not with what he'd done."

"But what about the movies he made? Couldn't you have shown those to someone? So you could get help?"

With a sigh, she shook her head and said, "No. He didn't start making the movies until after my mom left. I had no idea where he kept them, either, so even if I had wanted to show someone, I couldn't have. And besides, I didn't have anyone to show them to anyway."

"Couldn't my dad have helped you? I mean, you never talk about him, but he must have cared about you, right? He would have believed you."

"Oh, he believed me, all right. That was never the problem."

"What was the problem?"

He had never seen anyone wear the combination of sadness, grief, and hopelessness that his mother now wore. If despair could become flesh, it would have

wrapped its arms around her like a lover, like a mummy. It was enough to make Sawyer not want to know and to regret ever asking. If he had learned anything from the past few hours, it was that there is a reason they say, "Ignorance is bliss." He didn't withdraw his question, though, and when she was able, his mother answered him.

"Your father was my father."

Sawyer would have vomited if there had been anything left in his stomach. There wasn't even bile at this point, though his stomach did its best to go through the motions anyway. He felt hopeless right now, but he knew he'd get through anything if he had his mother with him. And with that thought, Sawyer's world shattered like the DVDs between his hands.

"Oh my God," he shouted jumping up from the couch and backing away from his mother as if she had morphed into a snake.

"Sawyer—"

"No! Don't come near me. How can you come near me? I'm a monster."

"Don't you dare say that."

"But it's true. How can you even love me? I shouldn't be here. You should have gotten rid of me before I was ever born."

His mother rushed to him, wrapping her arms around him and keeping him from retreating. She held him so tight that he thought his ribs would crack from the pressure. She made soothing noises that were inaudible over Sawyer's crying. They stood that way until most of his horror was spent and he could do nothing more than shake in her arms.

"You listen to me, Sawyer, and you listen good. I love you because you're my son. That will never, ever change. And I don't want it to. The only good thing that man ever gave me was you. I wouldn't give you up then and I won't give you up now."

"But, mom..."

"No 'buts'. You shouldn't have done what you did but neither should I. I should have found a way to tell you, but I was stupid and I thought that if I could just keep it from you, everything would be ok."

"It'll never be ok. Not now."

"Yes, it will. You're going to get up tomorrow and go to school. I'm going to get up and go to work. We're going to come home and talk about our day. We'll eat dinner. We'll do everything that we always do, and we'll do it the next day, and the next day."

"But it won't be the same."

"No, it won't. But that doesn't mean that we can't make it good. It'll just take time."

"How can you not hate me every single time you look at me?"

Of all the responses he might have expected, her silence wasn't one of them. He should have been afraid of the silence, but he wasn't. Silence meant she was thinking about her answer and not just telling him what she thought he wanted to hear. When she was ready, she tilted her head back slightly so she could look Sawyer in the eyes and said, "I don't hate you because I chose you. I didn't choose to get pregnant with you, but I did choose to stay pregnant with you. I chose to give birth to you, and I chose to raise you. I chose to run with you to keep you away from him. He never knew he was your

father. It's a small thing, but I was able to do that much. I wouldn't have made it through all of that without you. I don't hate you because I love you, and I always will."

Sawyer heard the truth ringing through everything his mother said. He admired the strength it took her to get away from the abuse, to give birth to him, and he respected his mother in a way he never knew he could before. If she said they could get through this, then they could. He didn't have to know how. All he had to do was trust his mother when she said they could.

Mind Games-Craft Essay

It is never easy to write about abuse. Whether it is a physical beating or sexual contact, there is an uncomfortable space one has to inhabit, for a time, in order to write the things that must be written. It is, then, never easy—should never be easy—to read about abuse for the same reason. “Mind Games” exists in this space. This story has a long history of radical revision. In the version originally drafted for Dr. Kelcey Parker’s ENG-W511 class, I threw out ninety percent of the story and redrafted it to a finished length of eighteen pages. This was the draft I presented to my thesis committee for consideration. Per the advice of my committee, I chose to have a main character die prior to the beginning of the story which substantially changed the structure. Although originally written as magical realism, I have rewritten the story as Realism. This allowed me to cut out problematic facets of the story and to focus more on the relationship between characters. These two changes were dramatic enough to warrant a complete rewrite of the story. The characters are the only thing to survive the rewrite.

In his article “In Search of Definition: American Literary Realism and Cliches,” Harold Kolb states that Realism is a contestable term which relies on, and revolves around, the ideas of “fidelity to actuality, objectivity (or neutrality—the absence of authorial judgment), democratic focus, social awareness (and critical appraisal), reportorial detail, and colloquial expression” (Kolb 165). Furthermore, Kolb takes issue with these terms, stating that even the most fantastic works still deal with the mundane and that no author can be completely objective; some are simply better at hiding their judgment than others. Though fictional, “Mind Games” is a story that can happen—that does

happen—on a fairly regular basis all over the world. Plausibility, or even probability, is not enough for Kolb to classify the story as Realism because even Fantasy stories such as *The Black Jewels Trilogy* by Anne Bishop include such normal bodily functions as female menstrual cycles, though they are called “moon times” in keeping with the genre. I include no excuses in order to undermine the horror of the grandfather’s acts, nor do I attempt to disguise his depravity. In a sense, I am objectively characterizing the grandfather which falls in line with the accepted definition of Realism. However, I make no effort to hide my judgment of the grandfather which illustrates Kolb’s point. Therein lies the problematic nature of the definition of Realism. In the end, “Mind Games” strives to present a realistic representation of a family affected by severe sexual trauma and, though there are some deviations from the accepted definition of Realism, the story is Realism in nature.

In changing to Realism, I had to manifest abstract ideas into physical representations so that I could explore them. “Realism,” J.M. Coetzee writes, “has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no separate existence, can only exist in things” (65). In order to explore the ideas of abuse, silence, and deception, I had to manufacture people to inflict these ideas on. Because I omitted the magical element of the story, I had to create concrete, tangible objects in order to reveal the abuse in a way that takes the choice out of Sawyer’s mother’s hands. Her lack of agency in revealing her abuse was intended to mirror her lack of agency in the abuse itself. Instead of giving Sawyer the ability to read his grandfather’s mind, I gave him an inheritance of homemade video evidence of the

abuse his mother endured. Beyond being the vehicle that breaks the silence surrounding the abuse, the videos are a way for Sawyer's grandfather to re-victimize his daughter and vicariously victimize Sawyer through her.

In the previous draft, I had multiple locations as settings. However, with the change to Realism, I pared this down to only two locations. The bulk of the story takes place at Sawyer's house with a small detour to the storage facility. George Saunders uses limited location in his novella "Pastoralia." By limiting the places that action can take place, Saunders is able to concentrate on the story and not waste space outlining additional settings. Additionally, Saunders has a limited number of characters he uses. Keeping this in mind, I eliminated every character except Sawyer and his mother. A friend of Sawyer's is mentioned and there is the note from the grandfather, but the focus is on these two characters which allowed me to concentrate on their story without getting lost in extraneous details.

The major question I have chosen not to answer throughout the story is "Why?" Why would the grandfather do this to his family? The answer to this question is in the title. Initially, when the story still included the mindreading element, the title was more literal. I removed the mind reading element, but I did not want to change the title. Also, I wanted the title to do more than echo a theme or be the hook to draw a reader in. By answering the "why" question, the title is unobtrusively doing a lot of work while also echoing a theme and drawing the reader in, as well as remaining relevant as a title.

Although there are elements of the Thriller genre in the pacing and the use of specific plot points to move the story along, the main drive is Sawyer's internal conflict.

In *The Art and Craft of Fiction*, Michael Kardos says that “the internal conflict gives significance to the story’s external events” (97). First, he has to try and come to terms with the fact that his mother has both lied directly to him by telling him his grandparents were dead and lied through omission by not telling him about her history of sexual abuse. It is this history that drives his mother to establish the “no lying” rule that Sawyer has grown up with, yet she is unwilling/unable to fully comply with the rule that she, herself, has established. There is a reverse image, of sorts, with Sawyer’s mother and his grandmother who accused his mother of lying even though she told the truth. Sawyer feels both betrayed and that he is held to a double standard, but he is also denied the context he needs in order to process those feelings. Later, once Sawyer watches one of the videos his grandfather left for him, he struggles with that missing context. It forces him to re-evaluate his mother’s actions and it adds shading to the black/white dichotomy of lies/truth. This is a binary system that Jamaica Kincaid used in *Lucy*. The title character and her mother were constantly placed into binary relationships. Though Kincaid mostly uses religious binaries, I chose a deceiver/deceived binary and forced the characters to alternate being the deceiver and the deceived.

Sawyer also struggles with feeling that he has re-victimized his mother by disobeying her, even though there was no reasonable expectation that there would be child pornography in his inheritance. His grandfather is the responsible party, yet Sawyer takes part of that blame onto himself. As a consequence, he is wracked with guilt over not only his own actions, but over his previous thoughts of his mother. This guilt is one of the reasons why Sawyer comes clean with his mother, even though there

was enough time for him to come up with a plan to avoid it. He used her deception as a justification for his actions, but ultimately it was her deception that Sawyer feels is justified.

Perhaps the most important craft decision I made in the story was to make my main character a teenage male. Sawyer is old enough to deal with adult themes, but immature enough that he acts without fully understanding the potential consequences. I call this device “teen boy logic.” His brain has not fully matured yet, so he lacks the critical thinking abilities that an adult would have. This allows him to act with some impulsivity. By being male, he hasn’t been socialized to consider the feelings and needs of others to the extent that females are. While a teenage female character might still act impulsively due to the lack of maturation, a girl might take longer to consider the affects her actions might have on other people. A teenage male character better served the story I was telling. That the main character is a teenager also makes for a more compelling story. I could have made this the mother’s story, but I do not think it would have been as effective because she has had the time to come to terms with her abuse. Sawyer has to try and cope immediately.

The biggest challenge for both Sawyer and his mother is re-conceptualizing their relationship. In terms of story endings, Kardos says that “the end of a story can and often should begin to reveal what sort of challenges lie ahead for your protagonist” (132). Sawyer has not only found out that his grandfather has sexually abused his mother, but his grandfather has fathered him, as well. In the literal sense, his relationship to his mother has expanded into a parent/sibling relationship. His mother

has had a lifetime to come to terms with this, so he will depend on her to help him figure it out. He feels like an abomination and that he is unworthy of being loved. His mother opens the door for him at the end of the story by telling Sawyer that she chose him. This revelation is what will allow their relationship to survive and will help both Sawyer and his mother to heal. Now that the silence surrounding her abuse has been broken, true healing can begin. Prior to this, there was only a pseudo-healing for his mother, a healing that allowed her to function in her daily life but was under constant threat of the truth. With nothing more to hide, perhaps Sawyer's mother will feel able to seek professional help for both herself and her son.

As I was originally drafting this story, I was also taking ENG-G 660. This class heavily influenced my writing at the sentence level. According to Kardos, "Long sentences are clearest when only some, rather than all, parts are expanded and modified" (153). I tried to use the techniques of linking and repetition in order to achieve the effect I was looking for. In particular, the repetition of "Don't tell your mama or she won't let you have them" to "Don't tell your mama" to "Don't tell." I wanted to start off with something that sounded perfectly reasonable and then move to something a bit more sinister before moving into the thing abuse survivors share: the command to keep silent. I paid closer attention to sentence structure, particularly how I began them. One of the problem areas of my writing is beginning several sentences in a row with "He" or "She." In some cases, I used Sawyer's name as a way of avoiding "he;" in other cases, I altered the sentence structure so that I could avoid using a noun or pronoun to start it. I paid attention to sentence length so that I avoided the choppiness

of several short sentences in a row, but I avoided sentences like the opening sentence in "Benito Cereno" by Herman Melville which is also the opening paragraph. Though grammatically correct, "Benito Cereno" opens with a series of subordinate clauses and parenthetical commas which makes getting through it a challenge. It is distracting for the reader, so I took pains to avoid it.

Throwing out the previous draft was painful, but it was the best thing to happen to this story. By getting rid of the magical/supernatural element, I was able to make the story more relatable and more tragic. Limiting the scenes and characters allowed me to focus on the important elements of the story and not get bogged down explaining details that were not necessary. Making the grandfather dead before the story began removed a satisfying comeuppance resolution. There is no confrontation possible now, no way to hold a monster accountable. It is just one more facet of Realism.

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